



Power Politics, Quest for Identity and Assimilation in Post Colonialism: A Study of Peter Caray's *Jack Maggs*

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Abstract

Australian settlement is most important in post-colonialism and has deep effect on culture and literature of Australia. After colonialism aborigines start re-writing history of Australia. Australian settlement has the feature of re-writing of history, especially for the Aboriginal population as their histories have mostly been erased. Most of the Australian writers talk about colonialism and its effects. Peter Carey is one of the major novelists who not only write on colonialism but also about Australian settlement and its effects of society and people. His *Jack Maggs* is an important novel in the section as it traces the life history of Jack Maggs, a convict who gets transported to England for a petty crime. The novel discusses his struggle to reconnect with his homeland. It is writing back of Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*. When Maggs returns back to England he sees that everything is changed and the changed London is not ready to accept him, though the old London was not different. But he kept on trying to find his roots. The present work focuses on the Jack Maggs' search for identity in his imaginary homeland and how he gets one only after its assimilation of his new world. The work also discusses the politics prevalent at different level of society and system to get what they want.

Keywords: Colonialism, Histories, Identity, Australian, Aboriginal.

Introduction

The Australian settlement is about the settings of the country and policies that has been adopted at the starting of the twentieth century. The term 'settlement' is about the settlement of human being on Australian land which states the idea that how Australia becomes a habitant land. It is a subject of controversy to talk about the exact arrival of Aborigines. According to the archaeologists the date of first arrival of Aborigines is "between 40,000-80,000 years BP" (Attenbrow, 2013). In 1971 some implements were found near Penrith in New South Wales that suggest about the settlement of Australia between 45,000-50,000 years BP. A large number of locations were "around 38,000 BCE" (Bowler, James M,2003) dated. Mungo Man is the oldest human being who was found at this continent and his remainders were exposed "in 1974 near Mungo Lake in New South Wales" (Irina, 2013). The correct date of Mungo man when he was found, is in discussion. The Aborigines were living a "hunter gatherer" life style until 1770, when Captain Cook arrived here and claimed the eastern part of the continent for the British Crown and named it New South Wales. The process of colonization and settlement of this large continent commenced in 1786 when the British government decided to dispatch a small fleet of eleven ships, carrying officers, mariners and 736 persons to found a penal settlement at Botany Bay in New South Wales. "The British government's 1786 decision to establish a penal colony at Botany Bay was the

outcome of an ongoing debate about how to deal with extreme overcrowding in English goals" (Bird, 1998). The British started interfering with the Aboriginals' pattern of living which resulted in bloodshed and mass killings of the natives since 1788.

The history of transportation and the settlement of Europeans in Australia had a great influence on culture and people of place. The present work focuses on the beginning of the transportation and the establishment of the first colony on Australian Land. It also highlights the re-birth and struggles of the convict to get his new status and identity on the new land. The history started nearby seventeenth-century when England started transporting people for major and minor crimes. During the 17th and 18th century about 60,000 convicts were transported to the colonies settled in North America. American transportation was stopped after the defeat of Britain in the American Revolutionary War. In 1770, James Cook claimed the east coast as a penal colony for Europeans. The first fleet of some convicts sailed on 13 May 1787 and reached on 20 January 1788 at Botany Bay. There were about 775 persons on six ships, including officials, members of the crew, mariners, the families and children, etc. They found Sydney, New South Wales and started to live there. They also settled their other colonies in Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) in 1803 and in Queensland in 1824. In 1829 they found the western coast of Australia and considered it as a free colony for convicts. These free colonies also include Victoria and South Australia.

The writer kept pushing their view for and against and writings holding different point of view came forward. Some of writers write from colonist's perspective and other from the colonized. A section of writers also writing back or rewrite the earlier text. The particular novel *Jack Maggs* is also a re-writing of Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*. Peter Carey is considered as a postmodern and postcolonial writer in Australia and his works are mostly about postmodernism and post colonialism and as well as a magic realist. These features of his works are described in a very specific way in *Jack Maggs*. *Jack Maggs* is a postmodern and postcolonial text which is about the Australian history. The text is considered as a postmodern and post-colonial because as a postmodern it describes the history of narrative language games. As a post-colonial, it describes 'the writing back of the history'. The novel analyses how Carey has a vision of post-colonialism and a concept of re-writing. The Victorian novel discusses the history of convicts and their settlement.

During the time of industrialization there was very big difference between class system. Rich become richer and poor become poorer. The working class was suffering for long working hours. Mercy Larkin, a maid in the novel, is also suffering under this condition of society. The condition of women in working field is very miserable. In factories it is seen that women are in extensive number than men. The owners accept women as workers for their sexual desires and also think that female working group is easy to manage than male working group. Child labour was also at its peak but were paid at a very low rates though they have to work for many hours. Low wages make the people to commit crimes like stealing, murder, rape, etc. For these crimes they were transported to Australia as a punishment.

In this particular novel, the protagonist Jack Maggs is transported to Australia and he returned to England to meet his son Henry Phipps who once helped him in England before his transportation. He was an orphan boy who was living a very miserable life but Jack Maggs helped him and kept sending him money, from Australia, to raise his low status. He considered him as his own son and a link to stay connected with his homeland. The novel opens with his arrival at London to meet him. He met with Tobias Oates who presented himself as a very sympathetic towards him and promised him that we will help him to get his son. But Oates has a motive in helping and guiding Jack. He is a writer and wants to write a novel on Jack Maggs titled *The Death of Jack Maggs*. He takes Jack Maggs in confidence

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and gets the real-life material for his novel. He wants to become a popular novelist, and thus gets revealed the story Jack Maggs to the reader. He lets reader know that Jack is an orphan boy and rose by a woman, who is abortionist. She takes care for him and makes him a thief for her earnings. Jack Maggs is arrested for his crimes and transported to Australia. When he comes back and start working as a footman, he met with Mercy Larkin. He shares his problems and past with her and falls in love with her. He states that he will never go back to Australia, there he has his wife and two sons. But when he realizes that his motherland is not accepting him and even his son is also pointing a gun on him, he decides that he have to leave England. Peter Carey focuses on his problematic life. He is struggling throughout his life to get his motherland but all of his efforts go fail. He always tries but does not get any close relation from anyone.

Peter Carey is well known for his surrealism in his writings and his works never attempts to give a complete vision to the culture and folk of Australia. Instead, he is an artist who creates myth to bring out the reality of contemporary or past world. His works are good examples of representing myths and culture in his own style. Carey sees that the culture, myth, and colonization can never be assimilated because they always go together. His *Jack Maggs* concentrates majorly work on the concept of the finding self of the convict who is transported to Australia during the time of industrialization in Europe. People were suffering under the growth of science and technology. It labelled people criminals and thieves. So the British government started their transportation to Australia. They lost their original identities and kept suffering for their lives. Peter Carey, in this work, gives the other side of the problem. He describes every aspect of society like cross cultural differences, myths, power politics, identity crisis, adaptation, and colonization. The present study brings forth a discussion on the identity crisis of Jack Maggs and his quest to find one. Power politics prevalent in the society at different levels and assimilation of the otherness.

The Novel begins with the arrival of the protagonist Jack Maggs at London. The arrival of Maggs can be compared to the arrival of David in Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* but in a different way. As we see that Maggs returns to London to find his identity in his motherland, David goes to London to look for his identity for better perspective. David has to face certain difficulties but, Maggs has to suffer at every step. Though the journey to London for both of them is problematic as they have to face many obstacles on their way but the important difference between the two is that David is a boy and Jack Maggs is a middle-aged man. In circumstances the protagonist can be related more to Magwitch of *Great Expectations* as Magwitch is also a middle-aged man. Jack Maggs, the hero of the novel, arrives London on Saturday on 15th April 1837. He was looking at the window of the Dover Coach as trying to relate to his land. Jack Maggs is suffering because of his label as a criminal only because he was banished to Australia with that. He is a pitiable character who has to face many problems in his exile and now also when he is back in his homeland. In *Great Expectations*, Magwitch is a convict but he is not bitter in heart as is helped by Pip from the very beginning of the novel until the end. Magwitch also helps him at the end of the novel same as Maggs is helped by Phipps. Interestingly, Maggs becomes so attached to him that he always considers him as his son. We are surprised to see him so curious to meet his son though he is not his real son. It seems that more than Phipps he is looking for a link to connect himself to the land, London. He has nobody else to connect to. In the very beginning when he comes to London and knocks his mother's door, she refuses to recognize him and takes him like a customer and tells him to come next day. Jack Maggs gets disillusioned when she denies any connection with him. When she recognizes him that he is Jack Maggs, she immediately tells him that she has nothing to do with him. She tries to scare

him and that government will hang him if they find out. She tells him to go back and never come back. She goes inside her home and shut the door. The visit to his mother house and the search for his adopted son is a symbol of his own search for his identity. It is a quest of belonging to something. He is trying to make a relation with his motherland where he wants to live. But in reality, London is his imaginary homeland which is not his home anymore. The question, "What do you want, Jack ... 'What are you doing here in London?'" (Jack Maggs, 5), asked by his mother resonates the country's point of view regarding his Identity in his homeland. Maggs gets angry at this and reverted saying "It's my home ... 'That's what I want. My home'" (5). Protagonist in Jack Maggs gives the point of view of society's 'others', while giving it the writer digs out the failures of a modern and advancing culture.

The protagonist in the novelist is much similar to Magwitch in Great Expectations by Charles Dickens. Likewise, Bliss, Illywhacker, and Unusual Life of Tristan Smith, Jack Maggs is also a direct attack on modern society. It also talks about the selfish attitude and crimes in a modernizing society. The character gallery of the novel has different range of character from selfish, cowards, criminal to the innocent and victims. The character of Oates, the novelist and the son Henry Phipps are some of the selfish and coward characters. Maggs keep hoping and waiting to meet his son but his son never intends to.

"I had hopes you might return tonight, perhaps having mistook my hastily written 23 for a 28, but I have waited these long hours on the settle, and now at your very handsome walnut desk in vain." (Jack Maggs, 81)

He meets many people while his search for Phipps and his interaction reveals the society of fast-growing London. He interacts with Percy Buckle, Tobias Oates, Constable, and Mercy Larkin so that he can get some help but it was only Mercy who shows some sympathy for Maggs and is genuinely concerned for his feelings. When Jack Maggs and constable were having a short chat on sideboard, Oates starts to make plan to mistreat Maggs.

"Jack Maggs stood at one end of the sideboard, his hands behind his back. Constable stood to the other. 'It is pretty clear by now,' said Oates, 'that no mesmeric act on earth will have anyone perform an act against their moral temper.' (Jack Maggs, 29)

When Maggs returns to London, he notices how the city has changed. Houses are built by bricks unlike past when they were of wood. The wooden houses were comfortable in hot nights.

"...the houses had been, for the most part, built from wood. They strained and groaned in the long hot nights, crying out against their nails, contracting, expanding, tugging at their bindings as if they would pull themselves apart." (Jack Maggs, 44)

But now they are strong, stiff and cold. He keeps on trying hard to mix up with his city but he is accepted neither by the city nor by the people. When he looks at Tobias Oates house he sees that it is made by bricks and have an English look and smell. It is painted and well decorated with new furniture.

"Everything in it glistened and was strong and bright and solid. This was a house that would never scream in dark, nor did it reek of sap or creosote. Its smells were English smells – polished oak, coal dust, Devon apples." (44)

By looking at brick houses he feels that he no longer belongs to this place and thus nobody will accept him. He for the first time claims that life in Australia was happy. He realizes that nobody is going to forget his past and he will always be looked at as a criminal. He feels hurt how people treat him in his own homeland.

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He is a kind man who keeps sending money to an unknown boy just to make him a polite and lawful man. He wished Phipps to have moral values, education and comfortable life. He feels bad to disturb Phipps life and so writes a letter to him explaining his situation:

“Henry Phipps, you were raised to have a tender heart and to obey the laws. This was always so clear in your letters, and it is no stretch to imagine that you were frightened to hear Jack Maggs was finally on his way into your polite and educated life.” (*Jack Maggs*, 82)

Power politics makes people very mean. In the novel, Tobias Oates, a novelist in the novel is in one of the shrewd men who is always ready to exercise his powers to hurt others. Many of the times he uses hard words for other which makes the readers troubled. He gives funny titles to his novels and sometimes uses words that shock the readers. Not only he is a failure as a writer, he is a failure as a human being too. He always sets to hurts Maggs by saying this and that about the crime he committed in past.

Oates is an opportunistic modern man, and made Jack Maggs suffered because of the petty power politics. Oates also mistreated Elizabeth Warriner. It is only Ma Britain who is beyond the reach of Oates. He has no effect on her. Once Maggs was arrested because he, Tom and Sophina were stealing silver but they did not carry it out. Sophina was asked so many questions in the court. Jack Maggs was asked about Tom, Sophina and the housebreaking. In the court, Tom said that Maggs wants to get rid of Sophina. In the court Tobias Oates said that Jack Maggs is behind this scene of steeling and proves him as a thief. He was ordered to leave England. Jack Maggs suffered in pain but Oates was nowhere to repent:

“Jack Maggs was weeping. He bent his body into a hard, tight ball. He grasped his stomach and rocked to and fro. Then came the sound of a squeaky wheel, very close by. The convict stopped weeping immediately.” (*Jack Maggs*, 304)

Jack Maggs biggest dream is to get united to his imaginary homeland which was always his but the land never accepted him as his own. His revisit to London, somewhat, made him realized that it was never his. It is as imaginary for his as are dreams. While sharing his past with Mercy, when she asked about his children, he told her only about Henry Phipps—his only link to his homeland, but not about Richard and John, his real kids in Australia.

“My son is an Englishman.’ ‘I meant your real children.’ ‘I am not of that race.’ ‘what race?’ ‘The Australian race,’ he said. ‘The race of Australians.’ ‘Damn you, don’t look at me like that. I am an Englishman.” (*Jack Maggs*, 341)

Jack Maggs is trying hard to assimilate with England culture. In his conversation with Mercy he says that he is an Englishman and he has an English son and stresses that he is not a part of Australian race. But when his son (Henry Phipps) holds a gun on him and tries to shoot him he gets disheartened to see that his son is also not accepting him. Finally, he decides to go back to Australia and left the place with the image of his London, which was his own in past days:

“...the home to which he would one day return, not the mudflats of the Thames, nor Mary Britten’s meat-rich room at Pepper Alley Stairs, but rather a house in Knightsbridge ... which he later knew was meant by authors when they wrote of England, and of Englishmen.” (*Jack Maggs*, 349)

Maggs escaped London with Mercy on the Portsmouth Mail. When Maggs reach there, he sees that his elder son Dick (eleven) and his younger son John (seven) years are in mess. Mercy starts taking care of them. She brushed their hairs and wiped their faces. The family starts prospering and Mercy takes them away to Wingham, far away from bad reputation of Sydney. She gave birth to five children. Maggs sold his brickworks and set up a saw mill and then again sold it and starts a hardware store and then pub. He keeps on growing and “was twice president of the shire and was still the president of the Cricket Club when Dick hit the cover off a new ball in the match against Taree” (Jack Maggs, 355).

The novel, Jack Maggs ends Jack Maggs as a rich and successful man assimilated in Australian culture. The novel is based on the cultural identity of Jack Maggs who is in between the two cultures; Australian and England. It is novel within the novel, *The Death of Jack Maggs* by Tobias Oates and *Jack Maggs* by Peter Carey and thus makes the reader a little bit confused about the ending of the novel.

To conclude, the problem of cultural identity is a modern concept in accordance with the global village concept. His (Peter Caray) novels have different themes that present cross-cultural identities. The inner and outer conflict of identity is always an important theme of his novels, though the style of expressing these themes is quite different in each one. Jack Maggs has different aspects i.e. guilt feelings, cultural identity, assimilation, colonization and civilization. It also has a concept of cultural identity so it can be seen throughout the novel on three different levels i.e. physical, psychological and imaginative. The protagonist of the novel is a victim of civilization that keeps him in trouble until the end. He was happy when he was in Australia. Carey’s cultural conflict and the conflict between the so-called cultural and innocent non-cultural people make the novel very important in fiction. The novel highlights the cries of a person for his identity. In *Jack Maggs*, Carey states a problem that hasn’t English people had a sense of ‘forgive and forget’ although they are civilized, educated and culturally developed. In the novel, Carey raises questions about Maggs’ identity, situation, culture, etc. Carey talks about the English people who put Maggs to a corner so he has to face many obstacles to fight for his cultural identity. Finally, by the end of the novel Maggs realizes that assimilation to the present is the best way to find the identity.

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Bio-note

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